

Message Text

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ACTION EA-09

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9756

INFO AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

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AMEMBASSY PARIS

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 17062

CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, TH,LA

SUBJECT: CURRENT THAI RELATIONS WITH LAOS, CAMBODIA AND VIETNAM

1. THE ACUTE CRISIS IN THAI-LAO RELATIONS PRECIPITATED BY THE ARREST IN VIENTIANE OF TWO THAI MILITARY ATTACHES APPEARS TO HAVE SUBSIDED WITH THEIR RELEASE (ACCOMPANIED OF COURSE BY A PREDICTABLE PGNU PROPAGANDA BLAST AGAINST THAILAND). THIS EPISODE PROVIDES A GOOD OCCASION TO ASSESS CURRENT THAI ATTITUDES TOWARD LAOS AND TOWARD INDOCHINA AS A WHOLE.

2. MOST STRIKING IS THE CALMNESS AND RESTRAINT WITH WHICH THE THAI HAVE GREETED THE RECENT PROPAGANDA BARRAGE FROM LAOS AND OTHER PROVOCATIONS BY THE LAOTIANS, INCLUDING THE FIRING ON THAI MEKONG RIVER UNITS AND THE EXPULSION OF THE THAI CONSULS FROM SAVANNAKHET, PAKSE AND HOVEI SAI. BY CONTRAST WITH THE THAI
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REACTION TO THE FALL OF PHNOM PENH AND SAIGON, THIS TIME THERE

HAS BEEN NO PANIC AND NO SELF-ABASEMENT. TAKING STOCK OF THE SITUATION, THE THAI HAVE DECIDED TO REACT AS A WISE AND TOLERANT OLDER BROTHER. EVEN IN VOICING THEIR OBJECTIONS TO THE FRACTIOUS BEHAVIOR OF THE LAO, THEY HAVE CONTINUED TO PROCLAIM THEIR GOOD WILL AND GOOD INTENTIONS TOWARD THEM AND THEIR WISH TO MAINTAIN FRIENDLY RELATIONS.

3. AT THE SAME TIME, WITHOUT OVERREACTION, THEY HAVE MADE IT PLAIN THEY WILL NOT ALLOW THEMSELVES TO BE PUSHED AROUND BY THEIR IRASCIBLE YOUNGER BROTHERS ACROSS THE MEKONG. THEY EXPELLED TWO LAOTIAN DIPLOMATS FROM THAILAND AND RECALLED THEIR AMBASSADOR FROM VIENTIANE, ACCOMPANYING THESE MOVES WITH CONCILIATORY NOISES. THIS WAS FOLLOWED UP WITH AN ANNOUNCEMENT BY THE THAI STEVEDORE UNION, AND A DAY LATER, BY THAILAND'S MAJOR TRUCKING ORGANIZATION, OF A BOYCOTT AGAINST THE HANDLING OF GOODS IN TRANSIT TO LAOS. BOTH ANNOUNCEMENTS WERE EXPLICITLY KEYED TO LAOTIAN POLITICAL MISBEHAVIOR.

4. THE BOYCOTT WILL SERVE TO REMIND THE LAOTIANS OF THEIR DEPENDENCE ON TRANSIT THROUGH THAILAND, BUT SINCE IT IS OSTENSIBLY A NON-GOVERNMENTAL ACTION, THE GOVERNMENT OF THAILAND CANNOT BE FORMALLY CALLED TO ACCOUNT FOR IT. (IN FACT, THE RTG MIGHT WELL BE BEHIND THE BOYCOTT.)

5. THE THAI PROBABLY HOPE THAT THIS PATIENT BUT FIRM APPROACH TO LAOS MIGHT PUT THE GENII BACK INTO THE BOTTLE AND RESTORE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES TO SOMETHING RESEMBLING NORMAL. AS PART OF THAT PROCESS, THEY ARE EVIDENTLY PUTTING THEMSELVES IN POSITION TO THROW A SOP TO THE LAOTIANS BY RETURNING TWO RLAF HELICOPTERS REMOVED FROM LAOS BY FLEEING PILOTS. THEY WILL ALSO SEEK TO DISASSOCIATE THEMSELVES FROM THE REMAINING RLAF AIRCRAFT IN THAILAND BY TREATING THAT ISSUE AS ONE BETWEEN LAOS AND THE U.S., WITH THEMSELVES AS INNOCENT BYSTANDERS.

6. PRIME MINISTER KHUKRIT PRAMOT EVIDENTLY BELIEVES THAT THE TIME IS RIPE FOR AN EFFORT TO BRING THINGS TO A HEAD AND TRY FOR A SETTLEMENT WITH THE LAO. IN A PRESS CONFERENCE ON AUGUST 15, HE CALLED FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A JOINT COMMITTEE "TO CONSIDER PROBLEMS RESPONSIBLE FOR DIFFERENCES, NOT ONLY ON BORDER INCIDENTS, CONFIDENTIAL

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BUT ON MATTERS IN GENERAL, THUS OVERCOMING ANY AND ALL MISUNDERSTANDINGS." THE PRIME MINISTER ADDED THAT THE RTG WOULD SEEK LAOTIAN AGREEMENT TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SUCH A COMMITTED AND ISSUE AN INVITATION FOR A MEETING TO BE HELD.

7. THE THAI ARE FOLLOWING A SIMILAR LINE IN THEIR APPROACH TO THE ELUSIVE CAMBODIAN REGIME. AT THE MEREST HINT FROM A LOWLY CAMBODIAN BORDER OFFICIAL OF A DESIRE TO MEET WITH THE TAI,

BANGKOK ISSUES A HIGH-LEVEL DECLARATION OF READINESS TO RESUME DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS. IT HAS NOT BEEN POSSIBLE FOR THE THAI TO CARRY THIS POLICY FURTHER SINCE THEY, LIKE THE REST OF THE WORLD, SEEM UNABLE TO LOCATE THE GOVERNMENT OF CAMBODIA.

8. AS TO THAI-VIETNAMESE RELATIONS, THAI ATTITUDES AT PRESENT CONTRAST SHARPLY WITH THEIR BEHAVIOR SEVERAL MONTHS AGO. AFTER THE FALL OF SAIGON, THE THAI SEEMED TO BE PREPARED TO EAT WHATEVER SERVINGS OF CROW WERE NECESSARY IN ORDER TO MOLLIFY HANOI AND SAIGON, BUT THEY HAVE LATELY TAKEN A MORE BALANCED POSITION. WHILE CONTINUING TO PROFESS THEIR DESIRE TO NORMALIZE RELATIONS, THEY ARE NO LONGER DISPLAYING EXCESSIVE HASTE IN THAT DIRECTION. FOREIGN MINISTER CHATCHAI'S OFTEN ANNOUNCED EARLY TRIP TO HANOI HAS BEEN POSTPONED SINCE THEN, THE THAI HAVE NOT YIELDED TO HANOI'S RUDE IMPORTUNITIES IN CONNECTION WITH THE FORMER SOUTH VIETNAMESE AIRCRAFT EVACUATED TO THAILAND, AND THEY ARE NOT PANTING AFTER SAIGON. THEIR UNEQUIVOCALLY TELLING HANOI TO MIND ITS OWN BUSINESS IN CONNECTION WITH JOINT THAI-U.S. NAVAL EXERCISES IN THE GULF OF THAILAND IS INDICATIVE OF THEIR NEW SELF-CONFIDENCE.

9. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THAI-PRC RELATIONS CAN BE SEEN AS A POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR THESE DEVELOPMENTS. THE THAI HOPE THAT PEKING WILL SOMEHOW PUT A REIN ON THE AGGRESSIVENESS OF HANOI, WHICH CONTINUES UNABATED. HAVING AS A FIRST STEP OPENED RELATIONS WITH THE PRC, THEY ARE NOW SEEKING TO FIND OUT TO WHAT EXTENT THEY CAN DEAL WITH LAOS AS AN ENTITY INDEPENDENT OF HANOI, AND TO GIVE ENCOURAGEMENT TO CAMBODIA, WHICH AS THE THAI KNOW, IS ALREADY STRIVING TO KEEP ITSELF OUT OF HANOI'S GRASP.

10. ALL OF THIS SUGGESTS THAT THE THAI HAVE REGAINED A GOOD DEAL OF SELF CONFIDENCE SINCE THE INITIAL TRAUMA INFLICTED BY EVENTS IN CAMBODIA AND VIETNAM AND THAT THEY ARE DEALING WITH THEIR NEW CIRCUMSTANCES DELIBERATELY AND SYSTEMATICALLY. AS A
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COROLLARY, IT IS TO BE EXPECTED THAT THEY WILL ALSO BEGIN TO EXAMINE FROM A LESS CONSTRAINED VIEWPOINT HOW TO EXPLOIT TO ADVANTAGE THEIR FUTURE RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES.
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